DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 068 022 HE 003 463

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TITLE	The Implications of Minnesota Metropolitan State College for Black Higher Education.
PUB DATE	Jun 72
NOTE	10p.; Paper presented at the conference on "Curriculum Change in Black Colleges," Dallas, June 12-23, 1972
EDRS PRICE	MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS	Curriculum Development; Educational Improvement; *Educational Innovation; *Higher Education; Interdisciplinary Approach; *Negro Colleges; *Negro Education; *Upper Division Colleges

ABSTRACT

This document describes the innovative approach that Minnesota Metropolitan State College, a recently established upper level college, has developed. It is felt that many of the aspects of the MMSC plan can be beneficial to planners in black colleges across the U.S. See also HE 003 464. (HS)

ED 068022

The Implications of Minnesota Metropolitan State College for Black Higher Education

David E. Sweet, President MMSC

A reader should approach this paper with the foreknowledge that its author is in no sense an authority on -- or even reasonably well-informed about -- black institutions of higher education. Despite this lack of empirical knowledge, however, I am confident that what MMSC is doing has many positive implications for those who are responsible for black colleges and universities. This paper is a description of our approach at MMSC to higher education. It seems best to leave to those more familiar with black colleges and universities responsibility for extrapolating the implications of what we are doing for their institutions.

MMSC is a new institution. In May-June 1971 the college was authorized by the Minnesota Legislature, approved by the governor, and established by the Minnesota State College Board, which appointed the president in late June. Between June 1971 and February 1972 a small group of college officers and faculty developed the plans and procedures for what Sidney Marland, U.S. Commissioner of Education, recently termed "one of the most flexible and potentially useful of all the schemes for alternative educational enterprises that have surfaced in the reform debate." Since February of this year the college has been admitting approximately 50 new students per month. By the end of our first full academic-fiscal year, in June 1973 we will have an enrollment of approximately 1,000 students.

For reasons which relate to the educational and political setting in which we were created, the college is primarily an upper-level institution, providing the final two years of a baccalaureate program for students who are admitted after having completed the first two years of college (or its equivalent) elsewhere. It is the considered opinion of college officers, however, that none of the basic characteristics of the institution are peculiar to upper-level education. We stand ready to operate a lower division program should that be necessary. At present, there are six publicly-supported junior colleges in the seven-county metropolitan area we were created to serve, as well as six publicly-supported post-secondary vocational-technical schools. In addition, there are private institutions performing functions similar to the state junior colleges and the area vocational-technical schools. Thus the reason for our abstaining from offering lower-division work although we may develop in cooperation with these institutions a lower division program modeled on our program.

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In addition to being an upper-level institution, MSC has another characteristic which makes it atypical in relation to most colleges and universities: Our student body is drawn primarily from among adults -- individuals beyond the traditional 18-22 year-old college-going population. This characteristic is also in large part the product of our educational and political environment. By focusing on the needs of this group we do not compete with the various private college and universities in the Twin Cities. At the same time, however, we are significantly broadening collegiate opportunities for those individuals who could not or did not take advantage of whatever opportunities existed when they were 18-22. But of a total population in the metropolitan area of 1.6 million, over one half are over 25 and almost 90% of those over 25 do not have college degrees. It is our contention that many of these can profit personally from having an institution in which to pursue a post-secondary education designed with their needs in mind. And it is quite clear to us that a large portion of this population is not interested in pursuing that education in institutions designed primarily to serve the needs of late adolescents and young adults. Again we would contend that this characteristic of MSC while making it atypical does not materially affect the applicability of what we are doing educationally in relation to serving the needs of different types of students. It may, however, indicate additional populations for other institutions, including black colleges and universities, to consider serving. In addition to focusing on the needs of a somewhat older student body, the college has also been designed with the needs in mind of others outside the traditional college mainstream: women and the economically poor.

Before describing the basic elements of our educational approach, one other characteristic of the institution deserves passing mention. We do not now have -- and will not have in the future -- a central campus. The entire seven county, Twin Cities metropolitan area is our campus. We utilize existing under- and un-utilized facilities, including commercial and industrial facilities, museums, theatres, libraries, office buildings, and even parks and streets. As you will see, these educational facilities mesh coherently with our entire approach to education.

At the heart of any college is its faculty. At MSC we have recruited a small core of full-time, for the most part conventionally trained and experienced professional educators. But we have also surrounded this core with a large number of individuals drawn from the metropolitan community. Such persons, whom we have come to call "community faculty", are individuals who have lived and worked successfully in non-academic settings throughout the cities. Some have advanced academic credentials and teaching experience. Most do not. (Some have no degrees at all.) They have demonstrated capacity both to learn and to apply what they know -- qualities sought by our students (and by most students). The community faculty members are full members of the faculty. In no sense are they adjunct to the college. They participate fully as faculty members in college governance and are eligible for faculty rank, tenure status, etc. All that distinguishes them from the other members of the faculty is that they do not serve full-time.

In building the faculty we have sought individuals who have knowledge, experience, insights, values, and a commitment to which students respond. Conventional academic credentials are of limited importance. We require that faculty members share the assumptions on which the institution is built, have competencies for preparing students for contemporary urban living, and have a commitment and a capacity to teach the kinds of students who enroll in the college.

In the interaction between full-time and community faculty members, some of the walls which typically surround an institution of higher education may be lowered if not completely eliminated. Students, instead of being exposed exclusively to a faculty whose members have devoted all of their adult years to academic life, are exposed to a faculty which is largely made up of individuals who currently live and work successfully in the kinds of settings in which most of the students will be functioning for the rest of their lives.

Although we have made no systematic effort to recruit individuals for the community faculty, we have been gratified at the spontaneous response. During the past nine months, over 800 persons inquired about serving, and over 400 have actually applied. The college uses its month-long orientation program for such applicants to identify those who have the necessary qualification. This orientation program includes working with students in what amounts to a practice-teaching situation. Now that it is possible for the college to identify student needs more precisely, we will recruit individuals for the community faculty more systematically. Community faculty members are not volunteers. They are paid at the same rate as full-time faculty members, although we are developing procedures for paying them which will relate their pay to the competencies actually transmitted to students rather than to time and effort expended.

Three basic commitments are central to our concept of education. First, students are admitted to the college and awarded degrees or certificates on the basis of demonstrated competence and not on the basis of grades, credit hours, or courses taken. Second, the education offered is explicity "pro-city" — i.e., urban-oriented. Third, at MMSC, each student is the principal architect of his own education. Admittedly these commitments exist in some tension with one another, but jointly they constitute the essense of our approach to education.

By "competence," we mean a combination of knowledge or skill (both mental and motor skill), understanding, and values and attitudes. It may help to understand our use of the term competence (proficiency is another term that might be used) to apply it to the building of a house. An individual might have the skill to use a hammer and nails or to install a sink. But he must also have some understanding of what a house is, how it will function, what the relation is among its various components. And before he will actually construct a house, he must also have a set of values or an attitude which impels him to utilize his knowledge and his understanding in the work at hand. If he considers houses an inferior place of abode (or physical labor undignified) he is not likely to erect any.

We apply this analogy to education. We hold that the point of participating in formal institutions of education is to acquire knowledge and understanding, and the values and attitudes which enable and compel one to use the knowledge and understanding acquired. At EMSC we begin by proposing to students that they need competence in five broad areas. The first of these is competence in basic learning and communication. A student should be able to demonstrate skills, understandings, and attitudes relative to learning itself. He should be able to show that he understands what it means to learn and that he can utilize methods of inquiry, communications skills, and critical and analytical skills. He must have a capacity for identifying issues and recognizing relationships and a generally positive posture in reference to the value and satisfaction of learning. He should be able to read, speak, write, listen, computate.

The second competence area we call civic involvement. This includes not only the political, but also the economic, the social, the religious, the cultural, etc. Most men live in communities. Decisions which are made by these communities affect individuals, shape them. We believe that formal institutions of education should assist individuals in becoming self-governing. To that end they must teach individuals to participate effectively in the community, in the making of community decisions of all kinds.

At the undergraduate level EMSC is essentially a liberal arts college. But we believe that no one should be granted a bachelor's degree who does not have competence in a vocation, a profession, or a career. It is essential that citizens have the skills necessary to be useful and productive persons, not only to insure economic independence, but also for reasons of self-esteem and satisfaction. No major social system in the 20th century will grant to individuals a share of the goods and services produced unless in some way such individuals contribute to the production or distribution of those goods and services. In other words, individuals must be able to function in the market place. Optimally the educated person has the flexibility for occupational mobility and the learning skills necessary for changes in an ever-increasing instability in the job market. We do not require that students have "college-level" vocations. They may be auto mechanics or plumbers as well as teachers, doctors, or businessmen. Some students come to us not yet committed to any vocation. These we help explore the options. Others have a commitment to learning "for its own sake." We try to help them understand that while it is possible for some few people to function in contemporary America on the basis of learning for its own sake, most can not. We try to help them appreciate the realities of the world as they will find it and to equip them to function in that world. To us this means that they must be able to obtain and hold a job or function on a self-employed basis.

One of the values of our community faculty is that the members of that faculty often illustrate in their lives a commitment to pure learning which has been coupled with a capacity for fitting into the contemporary economy. For this reason we do not seek community faculty members exclusively (or even primarily) for what they can contribute to the vocational competence of our students. We also seek community faculty members who have other kinds of learning to share.

The fourth competency area embraces leisure and recreation. In addition to being learners and communicators, citizens, and workers, men and women must in some sense "re-create" themselves. Individuals must learn to use wisely what is becoming -- at least in America -- an increased amount of leisure time. Such competence embraces the ability to distinguish between activities which deplete and activities which renew and restore. And it is our conviction that it must transcend spectating and include direct participation in both physical and mental challenges and challenges to one's esthetic sensibilities as well. And competence in this area includes a capacity for developing a continually-evolving set of skills, understandings, and attitudes -- life-long leisure competencies.

The fifth competency area we refer to as personal growth and assessment, or maturation. We believe that an educated person is one who is developing a sense of identity as a person of competence and skill. His sense of identity includes his relationships with others, his awareness and understanding of his environment, and his personal security as a productive and valued citizen. One who is educated has an appreciation of complexity and a tolerance for ambiguity without resorting to simplistic answers. He has the capacity to set goals for himself, to modify the goals in light of changed circumstances, to develop strategies for meeting goals, and to relate to others as human beings.

These five competency areas are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they are only conceptually distinct. Each overlaps the others. Neither are they courses of study. They are, rather, educational goals. A person who is competent in all five areas is, we believe, genuinely and liberally educated.

The college's commitment to competency-based education is supplemented by its commitment to the city. It has been said that contemporary colleges and universities are fundamentally anti-city. According to this view academic communities develop values, life styles, and attitudes which reject those of society generally. Students are taught to relate positively to academic values and negatively to the values of the larger community, which today is heavily urbanized. MMSC is "pro-city." The education of students focuses on the needs of the city and on giving students an understanding of how to live and function successfully in large urban areas.

As noted above, the commitments to competency-based and urban-oriented education exist in some tension with the third fundamental commitment. In taking the position that the student must be the principal architect of his own education, the college does not treat the competency areas and the urban commitment as requirements. We do ask each student to confront the competency areas and the urban commitment in a dialogue with his advisor, other faculty members, and other students. If in the course of such confrontation the student concludes that this concept of education is not pertinent to his goals and aspirations, then with the active support of his advisor he works out an educational plan which is pertinent and meaningful. The college holds that it is the student's education, his life, and he must bear responsibility for it.

In taking this position, we recognize two related facts. First, very little in the student's prior encounter with educational institutions prepares him for accepting responsibility for his own education. On the contrary, previous educational experience will likely have taught him that it is someone else's responsibility to tell him what he must do to be "educated." The college must, therefore, teach most, if not all, of its students how to design and secure their own education.

Second, a college exists to provide each student with intimate and meaningful contact with those who know more than he knows about the things he wants to learn. For this reason the college, and particularly its faculty, do not simply accept as valid any and all educational goals and methods posited by students. The faculty must analyze student educational goals and methods, pointing out that in them which is fallacious, inconsistent, meaningless, or contrary either to the student's or society's best interest. Each faculty member performs this function at MMSC, however, not merely by imposing his will upon students, but by confronting students with desirable alternatives and by treating the making of basic decisions about educational goals and methods as fundamental components of the teaching-learning relationships between instructor and student. Thus a faculty member must use his expertise and experience not to impose educational goals and methods on a student, but to teach educational goals and methods. The college also opposes attempts by students (individually or collectively) to impose their educational values on other students.

The question sometimes arises as to whether or not students will take advantage of this commitment to obtain a degree with a minimum of effort and learning. Our experience with the students currently enrolled convinces us that once they have come to understand that they, and they alone, are responsible for their own education and that the educational process is not a game in which the object is to outwit faculty members and subvert externally imposed requirements, they become very serious about their educational objectives and about acquiring competencies in which they have a genuine interest and which represent high levels of academic achievement.

But a second factor is also at work. The college plays no games with students. Our objective is to record accurately the competencies with which the student enters and the degree of competence he acquires in the time he is enrolled. This is not done by means of a transcript consisting of course titles followed by letter grades. The transcript which we develop for students is a narrative transcript. It is a comprehensive description of a student's abilities, incorporating evaluations of him by all faculty members with whom he has worked and incorporating a comprehensive final assessment of him at the hands of a final assessment committee structured individually for him. It includes the results of all the assessments of him which occur during his association with the college, including the results of standardized tests, interviews, oral examinations, papers, etc. In short, we propose to be able to report for each of our students a complete picture of what he knows, what he can do, what he has done, what his objectives were in working at MMSC, how he achieved those objectives, and at what level of competence.

To implement the educational commitments outlined above, the college has designed an educational format in which a student undergoes four phases in completing his education. These are: application and admission; orientation; educational pact development and implementation; and final assessment.

As with the five competency areas, these phases tend to be conceptually distinguishable but operationally inter-mingled.

During the first phase, application and admission, the student receives written and oral information about the college and its educational structure. He submits transcripts and other descriptive material. He also is interviewed by the admissions staff and begins to work on his self-assessment in the various competency areas. This procedure helps him determine where he is educationally and assists the college in moving him into the orientation phase.

Following admission each student is assigned to an orientation group -- eight to twelve in a group. Each group is led by a full-time faculty member. Each group meets four hours a week for three weeks. In addition to the group meetings, the student has at least one hour a week in private conference with his orientation advisor. The tasks to be accomplished during orientation include: reading and discussing the materials supplied by the college outlining the nature of the educational process at MMSC and the rationale behind this process; the further elaboration of the self-assessment of competencies begun during admission; and the identification of the student's perceived educational needs.

Upon completion of orientation, each student is assigned to a permanent faculty advisor. His advisor is his primary contact point with the college, its programs and resources. The assignment to an advisor opens the educational pact development and implementation phase of his relationship with the college. From four to six weeks (on the average) the student meets weekly with his advisor to organize his educational goals into a coherent plan of study. This plan is called his <u>educational pact</u>. It includes a summary of his already achieved competencies, the educational goals he is pursuing, the teaching-learning strategies he intends to employ to achieve these goals, and the assessment techniques and instruments to be employed by the college to determine that the student has in fact achieved the goals and implemented the strategies contained in his pact.

It often happens that students are unable to draft an educational pact so early in their relationship with the college -- that they have not yet settled firmly on educational goals. In these instances, students can and do undertake various learning activities with faculty members, the principal aim of which is to assist the student in defining his goals. It is also very likely that students will modify their educational goals once they have begun to implement their pacts. The college is open to pact modification whenever a student initiates it.

Educational pact implementation takes many forms. The college rejects the position that students can learn only by means of college-sponsored activities. On the contrary, we believe that it is vital for students to take advantage of the rich array of learning opportunities which surround them in the metropolitan area. Thus students are encouraged to learn on the job, in the home, in their neighborhood, at play, etc. The college inventories formal and informal learning opportunities for students, calling attention of students to these opportunities through a variety of communication

linkages. In short, the college position is that it is less important to determine when, where, how, and from whom a student learns, and more important to make it possible for him to learn. We recognize that different people learn in different ways and encourage students to find out how best they learn and to concentrate on those techniques which are of greatest assistance to them.

But the college itself does sponsor teaching-learning activities. These include independent study, internships, and group-learning experiences. We do not, however, offer courses in the conventional sense. Group learning experiences are flexibly organized around the interests and needs of students. Faculty members can take the initiative in designing these experiences or students may take that initiative. We have no terms, quarters, or semesters. Each learning experience operates on its own calendar. No student may be required to participate in any particular learning experience -- nor indeed may a student be required to use college-sponsored learning activities at all. In general, students implement their educational pacts by negotiating contracts for units of study with full-time and community faculty members. Each of these competency unit contracts is a part of the student's strategy for achieving a desired level of competence in the five competency areas. (Of course, for those students who do not follow the competency-based educational pattern with which the college first confronts them, the educational pact development and implementation phase takes whatever form is appropriate to the individual's own program of study.) Upon the completion of the contract an evaluation of work done and progress made is filed by the student and the appropriate faculty member. The advisor, of course, assists the student in identifying those learning resources -- college-sponsored or otherwise -- and those full-time and community faculty members likely to be of greatest assistance to him in completing his educational pact. (Community faculty members, as noted above, are to be paid for competency contracts satisfactorily completed and not for time and effort expended.)

When the student and his advisor conclude that the student has fulfilled the conditions -- the goals -- contained in the student's educational pact, the student begins to develop a draft of his narrative transcript, incorporating his pact, any competency contracts he has completed, and whatever assessments of him as are on record. With this draft he then makes application for his degree (or for certification, if he is not seeking a degree) to the Vice President. The Vice President appoints a Final Assessment Committee to review the student's draft narrative transcript and to determine whether or not the student has completed the terms of his educational pact. The Committee prepares the final version of the transcript, including its written assessment of the student. Upon approval of the FAC, the student is eligible for his degree or certificate. If the FAC determines that the student has not fulfilled the terms of his pact, the student may continue his relationship with the college until a FAC is satisfied. It is also possible for a student (or a faculty member) to appeal a FAC's decision.

What does MMSC imply for black colleges and universities? What follows are not particularly profound observations. I plead here, as at the outset, too little knowledge to be deep.

First, it seems to me that our concept of the community faculty is one especially pertinent to a community becoming increasingly self-conscious and committed to mutual service. Every black college ought to tap black resource faculty for the same reasons UMSC is tapping them. These men and women are so often more relevant as life models for students than are one's full-time faculty. Recognize too how much more flexible they can be. One need not have long-term contracts with them. Their knowledge can often be very immediate. But recognize that they cannot function unless they understand your institution. Make the effort and take the time to give them a clear understanding of what is expected of them. And make them full partners in the enterprise. Don't dangle them as adjuncts. Involve them in the governance of the institution. They have much to offer, for example, when it comes to evaluating full-time staff -- including presidents.

Second, I am an imperialist when it comes to competency-based education. If you cannot pursuade the faculty to abandon the rigidities of course structures, you ought at least to move in the direction of defining expected outcomes from courses -- and then faculty and students should be held to those outcomes. The meaningless accumulation of course titles on a transcript ought to be scrutinized vigorously. Colleges should make a determined effort to find out what its students know when they enter. And they should act on that knowledge. Students should not be forced into curricula designed to serve faculty needs rather than the needs of the individual student.

Third, every student should be permitted or made to accept responsibility for designing and achieving his own education. Paternalism in the curriculum is as dangerous as it is in any other area of college life. Colleges are today dealing with young men and women called upon to perform the highest duties in peace and war. Such young men and women can and should accept much more responsibility in determining educational goals and strategies. A word of caution: in my judgment, however, a college has not made a step forward when it turns over responsibility for the curriculum from the faculty collectively to the students collectively or to the students and the faculty collectively. Neither the students nor the faculty collectively is accountable in any real way for what happens to a particular student. I conclude, therefore, that only the individual student is accountable and he ought to have authority commensurate with that for which he is accountable.

Fourth, I would urge that the conclusion of an education not be the counting of courses and grades by a clerk in the registrar's office. Colleges need to institute something akin to our Final Assessment Committee to provide each student with a measured picture of himself and to force the student to bring his educational experience to an articulated conclusion.

Fifth, stop asking students where, when, how, and from whom they have learned. Focus on whether or not they know. Let them satisfy your requirements however best they can. Stop monopolizing education. Recognize what students know. Let them know they can move through your institution as slowly or as rapidly as they can demonstrate that they know whatever it is you (or hopefully they) have determined they should know. The educational lockstep can be broken.

Finally, recognize that many people who aren't 13 to 22 need your services. Redesign your institutions to accommodate these people. Not only will they be grateful as individuals, but the accomplishments of this group of students may bring distinction to us all.

These of us responsible for MESC find our approach to education exciting and satisfying. We see pitfalls. Implementation and design are not always compatible. The faculty, officers, and students of MESC are conscious -- extremely conscious -- of the difficulties inherent in our approach to education. But the difficulties of competency assessment, educational and career advising, and the development of individualized educational pacts with our students must not, we believe, inhibit the development of an educational process which validates formal education in demonstrable skills, knowledge, values, attitudes, and understanding, rather than credit hours, grade point averages, tuition, or even gross annual income.